



On the Block

Alberta's high school sports are up for auction

High school gyms are covered in as much advertising as the boards at Rexall Centre or the Pengrowth Saddledome. Should corporate sponsors have this much access to schools?

by Steven Sandor

THE STANDS IN THE GYM AT SHERWOOD PARK'S SALISBURY Composite High School are packed. Parents, students and fans wave signs urging their teams to give their all for that one last victory. This game between the Grande Prairie Tomahawks and Red Deer's Lindsay Thurber Raiders determines the senior boys' 4A provincial volleyball title.

Like any school in Alberta, the Salisbury gym walls are covered with banners celebrating past provincial championship wins. Every banner from 1997 on carries the McDonald's logo. Throughout the game, players get drinks from a McDonald's canteen. A large McDonald's banner hangs above the scorer's table.

These are the McDonald's Alberta Schools Athletic Association High School Provincials.

The game is tense. A top-level professional event couldn't be more engrossing. Red Deer wins the first set. Grande Prairie coach Dave Johnson rallies his troops; he reminds them that they have won this championship in both 2002 and 2003; he knows his boys can overcome the adversity of being upset in the first game. The Tomahawks show their championship mettle in the second set: after storming out of the gate by winning 12 of the first 16 points, Grande Prairie holds on for a 25-22 win. Then Grande Prairie wins the third set and the school's third provincial title in a row.

As the winning team, the Tomahawks receive McDonald's "Play" T-shirts. In the hallways "Play" trademarked signs point the way to the gym. "Play" is a new McDonald's initiative that the company claims encourages young adults to be more active. It also helps McDonald's use sports, from skateboarding and extreme cycling to high school athletics, to promote its brand.

Other corporate sponsors also display their banners at the

championship: Elite Sportswear, Tyleen Sportswear, Driving Force and Powerade (Coca-Cola's sports drink). Athletes in the crowd wear jackets with more sponsor logos: TD Canada Trust, the local Chrysler/Jeep dealer, EconoLodge and Pizza Hut.

IN THE PROVINCE THAT BOASTS THE LARGEST GOVERNMENT surpluses in all of Canada, why do high-school athletes need so many corporate sponsors? What is the cost of allowing corporations to invade children's lives even in their schools?

According to a 1997 Alberta Schools Athletic Association (ASAA) study, being on a school team helps students to not only prepare for the future, but also to cope with the present. The study found that student athletes were less likely to smoke (30 per cent of student athletes smoked compared to 44 per cent of non-athletes) or drink (9 per cent compared to 20 per cent). The ASAA study also found that more student athletes have high marks than non-athletes.

These findings are corroborated by US research. A North Carolina High Schools Athletic Association study found that the dropout rate for student athletes was much lower than for non-athletes: less than 1 per cent and almost 9 per cent respectively. The study states, "Student-athletes tend to participate at a greater rate in other school activities, and they have a more positive perception of their school." A 1999 study by University of Colorado professor Dr. Kevin J. McCarthy found student athletes had a grade point average of 3.093 on a 4.0 scale, compared to 2.444 for non-athletes.

Tomahawks coach Dave Johnson identifies other, less tangible benefits for the boys on his team. "The next time these boys come into a situation in their lives where things

Left: McDonald's is the main sponsor of the McDonald's/ASAA High School Provincials for every high school sport in the province.

"The schools might think the money comes with no cost. But there is a social cost... Our schoolchildren should not be for sale."— Gary Ruskin



aren't going their way, they can reflect back on this as a real life lesson, to never quit trying, and knowing that if they don't give up, they'll come out on top."

The government of Alberta recognizes the benefits of physical activity. As part of Ralph Klein's wellness initiative, the province plans to implement a mandatory 30 minutes of physical activity a day for all students. Education Minister Gene Zwozdesky has met with school board officials to determine how to implement the program, says Alberta Education spokesperson Kathy Telfer. "Some schools are looking for ways to comply with the initiative. Some of these schools don't have gyms. And there are other challenges." It's going to be difficult to meet the goal.

But Telfer points out that students who participate in extracurricular sports—sports Alberta Education does not fund—will help the department reach its 30-minutes-per-day goal. "We know that kids who are involved in school sports teams are for the most part meeting and likely exceeding the target."

And yet, despite the mounting evidence that high-school sports participation boosts grades and attendance, and their own stated commitment to increase students' physical activity, Alberta Education's policy states that high-school sports are strictly an extracurricular activity, and therefore not eligible for base funding.

In 2004/05, Alberta Education spent a total of \$3.9-billion on kindergarten to Grade 12 education. According to Alberta Education's budget material, "A report released by Statistics Canada in September 2004 shows that Alberta spent more per student on the K-12 learning system than any other reporting province in 2002/03. Since then, funding has increased nearly \$500-million annually."

However, none of that money is dedicated to junior-high or high-school athletics. School boards may turn over some funds, but for the most part high schools' sports teams are funded through grants from other government bodies, fundraising, user fees and corporate sponsorship.

At Grande Prairie, the school covers about 15 per cent of the

Tomahawks' expenses. The rest is up to Johnson, his players, parents and volunteers. "We try to schedule our season as competitively as we can," says Johnson. "We have gone to tournaments in British Columbia and as far away as Winnipeg. Because of that, there are extra costs; so our players are dedicated not just on the court but off the court as well to help raise funds."

Ishbel Mucklow, president of the ASAA and former athletic director of Salisbury, where she still works, says that, like many schools, Salisbury has some flexibility with the money it gets from Alberta Education and uses some of it to offset the costs of extracurricular athletics. She says Salisbury teams get a combined \$15,000 per year.

"There is no guideline at all," says Mucklow. "Some schools do more and some schools do less... \$15,000 isn't nearly enough. There are league fees and other costs, so each individual athlete is faced with user fees, or the teams have to look to do some kind of fundraising. It costs \$200 to enter a tournament; if you enter five tournaments a season, well there's \$1,000 right there. At Salisbury we have more than 15 sports teams; we have four volleyball teams and two football teams; two soccer and two rugby; we have wrestling, cross-country, track and field, golf."

When the ASAA was founded in 1956, it received some funding from the Ministry of Education. But, for most of the last three decades, all of its provincial funding has come from the Alberta Lottery Fund and the Alberta Sports, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation, despite the positive links between athletics and education. "The Lottery Fund is our biggest sponsor; without them we would not be able to operate," says Mucklow. But the ASAA knows this might not last, so it is developing a new funding strategy.

John Paton, the executive director of the ASAA, says the organization sets aside \$65,000 per school year to help teams travel to and from provincial championships. But with so many schools playing in a wide range of sports, from curling to swimming, the money doesn't go far. It's a fund the ASAA wants

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to see grow. “When a school qualifies [for a tournament], they may be looking at travel expenses of \$4,000 to \$6,000 and they are going in a week,” says Paton. “That leaves them just five or six days to come up with the money.”

With travel costs rising, if ASAA funding does not increase, students will have to pay higher user fees. “We haven’t approached [Alberta Education] for funding because we know what their stance is on extracurricular activities,” says Paton. “Even though we are the largest of all the extracurricular activities, we know that band, drama and debating would also then come to the pot looking for funding... Our concern is that what used to be free is no longer free,” says Paton. “Because of the rising costs of school sports, we are seeing user fees affecting student athletes everywhere across the province. Our viewpoint is that any fundraising that takes away from study time or practice time is not good. We don’t want to be taking away from our students.”

And that’s where corporate money comes in.

The main part of the new ASAA strategy is to increase corporate sponsorship.

Almost every school athletics program in Alberta uses some kind of corporate support. High-school gyms now sport just as much advertising and sponsorships as you’d find on the rink boards at Rexall Place or the Pengrowth Saddledome.

The scene at Salisbury is by no means unusual. McDonald’s sponsors each and every ASAA provincial championship, from curling to track and field to football.

“Certainly we have to thank our sponsors like the Driving Force, McDonald’s and Coke,” says Mucklow.

While McDonald’s gets signage in every Alberta school that hosts or wins a provincial championship (and winners’ banners are displayed for years), McDonald’s will not disclose the financial details of its community-sponsorship deals.

“McDonald’s has always stayed close to its customers and to what is important to them,” reads a company statement at its Canadian website. “Our sports involvement is no exception.

McDonald’s focuses on sports reflective of our own values: universality, accessibility and team spirit.”

“It’s about corporate responsibility. In any community where you see a McDonald’s restaurant, you will see us giving something back,” says McDonald’s Canada corporate spokesperson Chris Stannell. “We have programs like this across Canada. And we have a great working relationship with ASAA.”

Joel Bakan, author of the book and film *The Corporation*, sees it differently. He writes, “Corporations become involved with schools for the same reason they do everything else—to promote their own and their owners’ financial interest... Schools are being transformed into commercial enclaves by the various forms of advertising and promotion that corporations are using within them.”

Paton says corporate deals provide roughly \$100,000 per year to the ASAA. This is a small price to pay for what they get: corporate logos on nearly every surface in the gyms of the high schools our kids attend. Whether it’s to shoot hoops or see a high school play, students are exposed to McDonald’s banners every time they go to their school gym. Despite the rhetoric about the generosity and community-mindedness of corporate sponsorship, the corporations are getting the most from the deal. In exchange for a small amount of money, schools become billboards for corporations and a most effective way to get advertising messages to the lucrative teen market.

According to a report from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, the commercialization of Canadian schools has been neither sudden nor accidental—corporate sponsorship of school programs allows governments to justify decreasing funding, which increases the reliance on corporate dollars. This loop is referred to as “commercial creep,” and is a step toward privatization of our public schools.

Erika Shaker of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives writes, “Privatization includes all forms of privately funded public education, including individual and corporate donations, user fees and advertising-for-service. It also refers to the shifting



mindset that views education as an individual, private good or responsibility rather than a social, public one.”

Heather-Jane Robertson, an anti-privatization activist, refers to corporate sponsorships as privatization by stealth. “Corporations like ‘soft advertising,’ and associations with children and schools are warm and fuzzy, slip under the radar, and provide great social marketing opportunities,” Robertson said in a speech to the B.C. Teachers’ Federation. “And, don’t forget, a tax write-off. The duplicity is absolutely astounding. One arm of the corporation sits around with the big guys at the Council of Chief Executive Officers—what used to be the Business Council on National Issues—demanding corporate tax cuts, more privatization and lower standards of public services—while the other arm, the ‘philanthropic one,’ tries to launder its image through partnerships with schools.”

In the case of McDonald’s, the company is trying to launder its image as an unhealthy food choice by sponsoring sports.

According to Gary Ruskin, founder and executive director of Commercial Alert, a Portland, Oregon-based lobby group that fights the growing reach of corporations into the lives of children and teens, Alberta schools are allowing sponsors to send students a message wrapped in goodwill—to eat Big Macs and drink pop.

“Canada has such a problem with obesity, which poses such health risks down the line, from hypertension to diabetes to cancer,” says Ruskin. “The schools might think the money comes with no cost. But there is a social cost... Our school-children should not be for sale.”

Further, Ruskin says the actions of Alberta schools—to seek more corporate sponsorship from junk-food manufacturers—flies in the face of what’s happening in the US Los Angeles recently banned pop from all city schools; Maine ordered pop machines out of its schools; New York City banned pop and candy in its schools; and San Francisco pulled soda and candy from the shelves of its school cafeterias.

For Johnson, his goal for 2005/06 will be a fourth consecutive provincial championships for his Tomahawks, while balancing the budget and making the program accessible. But as the costs of sport increase, so does the need for funding. And at the moment, corporate sponsors are the ones offering a quick solution. It is hard for administrators, coaches and volunteers to take the time to weigh the morality of allowing the corporate world access to their kids when they have bills to pay—and games to play.

Without a change in our attitude about not only the benefit of sport but the cost of allowing corporations access to our schools, the corporate hold on high-school sports will continue to strengthen.

Steven Sandor is an Edmonton-based freelance writer and editor who has been published across North America and Europe. His first book, *The Battle of Alberta: A Century of Hockey’s Greatest Rivalry*, will be published this autumn by Heritage House. He is the former managing editor of *Vue Weekly*, and was editor of *Zone*, the official magazine of the Edmonton Oilers. Before growing up and heading off to work, Steve flailed in the pool with the St. Thomas Aquinas Raiders high school swim team in Brampton, Ontario.

Programs, resources, extracurricular activities, fundraising events and even schoolrooms in the Alberta public school system are at least partially funded by corporate sponsorship. In return, schools are flooded with corporate logos. We risk turning our schools into factories to produce consumers rather than places to raise future citizens and critical thinkers.

While McDonald’s is not alone in sponsoring public school activities, the amount of access the corporation has to Alberta’s schoolchildren is surprising. In addition to a number of individual school initiatives, McDonald’s sponsors a variety of city-wide, province-wide and Canada-wide programs in public schools.

In Edmonton, McDonald’s runs the McLibrary Reading Adventure, a program that encourages children to compete for the greatest number of minutes spent reading at home.

According to the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) website, “McDonald’s Restaurants supplies many local schools with free educational resources.” This includes two 45-minute plays featuring Ronald McDonald that encourage children to believe in themselves and to read (a play called “Fit & Fun” offered in previous years has been cut).

The CBE describes Ronald McDonald as a “magical friend [children] can relate to and trust.” The site goes on to say that Ronald “brings a powerful message to children in Grades K-3.” What that message is, the CBE doesn’t specify.

CBE has also received a \$23,746 grant from Ronald McDonald Children’s Charity in support of a Snoezelen Room for children with severe disabilities. (The company has sponsored other Snoezelen Rooms in other public schools across the country.)

McDonald’s supports the CBE’s Book Bags for Kids by giving promotional bookmarks, posters and plastic bags to this program that supplies books to underprivileged children. Other programs McDonald’s, and Ronald himself, participate in include CBE’s Raise a Reader program, Read it Over program and the CBE-learn Open House.

McDonald’s and the Canadian Olympic Committee co-sponsor the annual Olympic Day Run in schools across Canada, including Calgary and Edmonton. Between these special events and programs such as the McDonald’s High School Provincials, which post logos in participating schools in perpetuity, McDonald’s has direct access to the hearts and minds of our children, and the tacit endorsement of the public education system and all teachers and parents. Whatever they have donated is nothing compared to what they have received in return.

While Alberta Education forbids fundraising or corporate sponsorship for “basic instructional needs,” this only stops corporations from paying for anything that is strictly required by the curriculum; it does not include library books, supplementary textbooks, school and playground enhancements, field trips, computer equipment, musical instruments or other “extras.”

